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ABSTRACT

Beginning teachers experience problems in moving from a traditional classroom environment to a constructivist classroom, especially in their use of traditional language. Traditional language not only does not work in a constructivist classroom, but hinders the creating and sustaining of such. Teachers can change the language they use in the classroom to promote more positive results. Five words or phrases that help focus on the learner and learning rather than on teachers and teaching are: (1) changing "teaching" to "learning"; (2) changing "lesson plan" to "student learning plan"; (3) changing "cover" to "discover" or "uncover"; (4) changing "(interdisciplinary) unit" to "(interdisciplinary) investigation" or "(interdisciplinary) exploration"; and (5) changing "presentations" to "interactive learning experiences." An example of a "student learning plan" on the causes of the Civil War is included. (ND)

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# Developing New Language for a Constructivist Class

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Developing New Language for a Constructivist Class

For almost ten years, I have been working with pre-service teachers in teacher education programs. Most of these teachers come to believe in and support active learning propositions which propose that when students investigate, discover, and figure out for themselves, their learning is longer lasting, more comprehensive, and in greater depth than learning that occurs in a traditional, teacher-driven classroom (Aiken, 1942; Darling-Hammond, 1993; Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Perrone, 1994). These teachers begin their internships or student teaching practicums fired up about what they can accomplish and how they will do it. However, very often the realities and rigidity of either the school systems in which they work or of the cooperating teachers or mentors with whom they work prevent the teachers from reaching their goals. At least that is how the teachers come to understand their lack of progress. My observations lead to a different conclusion; that is, that many of the problems these teachers have in transitioning from a traditional environment to a constructivist classroom relate to their use of traditional language.

Similarly, I have worked for several years with public school teachers in school districts interested in reform and constructivist appoaches for the classroom. Even for these teachers who know their systems and their colleagues well, the change process is difficult and the teachers often conclude that it is the system/colleague dynamic that gets in the way of positive change. As with the pre-service teachers, however, it appears to be, at least in part, the teachers' use of traditional language which creates the obstacles.

Recognizing the value of shifting, and trying to shift, from a traditional classroom to an active learning environment but having less than expected results can be very frustrating. If you are having similar issues, the first thing you need to do is review the language you are using with your students and peers. What most teachers use is the language they know and that is the language they experienced themselves as students. That language has its origin in the traditional, behavorist system which more often than not defines learning as acquiring, accumulating, and memorizing information rather than understanding in depth, developing and solving problems, and raising and investigating questions (Darling-Hammond, 1993). That traditional language not only does not work in a constructivist classroom, but hinders the creating and sustaining of such. What language can you change in your classroom to allow for more positive results - to create the energized, student-powered learning environments you desire? Following are five words or phrases which not only can lead to more positive and lasting transitions, but will force you to keep the emphasis where it belongs - on the learner and learning, rather than on the teacher and teaching.

1. Change "teaching" to "learning."

   Force yourself to rephrase every sentence, question, and thought in which you use a form of the words teach, teaching, or teacher to use a form of the words learn, learning, or learner. For example, instead of asking yourself how you can teach Johnnie to do long division, change the question to: "What is the best way for Johnnie to learn long division?" This forces a shift in your thinking and puts

the focus on Johnnie and his abilities/talents/limitations. This simple, yet not so simple, word substitution will generate further questioning and thinking by you and will be more apt to lead to a constructivist approach to the situation. Remember, you can teach students anything, but it doesn't mean they have learned a thing.

2. Change your "lesson plan" to a "student learning plan."

Here again the idea is to shift the focus from you to the students, from teaching to learning. To change your written plans, especially if you are a new teacher, you may need to create two plans. One will become your agenda - the list of things you will do during the class or day, and the other becomes the students' learning plan. It could look something like this:

Student Learning Plan

**Topic: Causes of the Civil War**

**Student Learning Objective:**

Students will demonstrate understanding of the causes of the Civil War.

**Learning Activity:**

Students will work in pairs. Each student in a pair will conduct specific and different research related to the causes of the Civil War; i.e., Susie will review newspaper reports of the time period and draw conclusions about the causes of the Civil War; her partner Sandy will conduct research on the internet to determine different viewpoints on the causes of

the War. Similarly, other pairs will define their research. The more different the research assignments are in the different pairs, the more thorough the learning for the whole class will be.

**Student Demonstration of Understanding:**

To demonstrate understanding of the causes of the Civil War, students will draw cartoons which analyze the causes

OR

students will create a video (or skit) which analyzes different perspectives of the causes

OR

students will be involved in...any other activity which allows you to discern student understanding, not simply recall.

This kind of student learning plan will move you into further dimensions of constructivism. Not only will you be focusing on the learner and learning, but you will be concentrating on a core constructivist proposition - that is, that learning means understanding and being able to demonstrate that understanding. That's the key phrase - demonstrate understanding. Repeating information, as is often the norm in a traditional class, does not demonstrate understanding or learning - it simply demonstrates ability to repeat information.

3. Change "cover" to "discover" or "uncover."

Of all the traditional classroom language I hear pre-service and in-service teachers use, this is the deadliest. As long as you "cover" curriculum, you won't be able to establish a constructivist learning environment. It's not that content is not important; it is very important, but in a constructivist classroom, a teacher does not stand and deliver all or even much of the content; rather, students uncover, discover, and reflect on content through inquiry, investigation, research, and analysis in the context of a problem, critical question, issue, or theme. How many times have you heard another teacher or even yourself saying something like the following:

> "I have to cover World War II by the end of May."
>
> "I covered fractions last week."
>
> "Next week we will cover grammar techniques."
>
> "We have the departmental exam in February, so I have to cover half the textbook by then."

Heed the the advice and warning of an experienced teacher:

> Covering content or curriculum is like putting a lid on a pot. We shouldn't be putting a lid on the pot; students should be taking the lid off the pot and figuring out what's in it and why. (White in Page, 1992, 212)

This teacher has captured the essence of another core principle of a constructivist learning experience: it is through active questioning, searching, discovering, interpreting, and reflecting that a student creates her/his own knowledge and meaning and becomes an

empowered learner (Hartoonian, 1989; Kreisberg, 1992; Toffler, 1991).

4. Change "(interdisicplinary) unit" to "(interdisciplinary) investigation" or "(interdisciplinary) exploration."

Can you think of a more boring or inactive word than "unit?" Who could possibly get excited by that word or concept? If you are trying to incorporate active learning into your classroom, you need to get rid of that word and find an action word to take its place. It needs to be a word that conveys in some way the central learning activity. I have suggested investigation or exploration. You can probably think of others. The trick is to pay attention to when you are using "unit" and force yourself to make the change. If you put the two words side by side **[Unit...Investigation],** what happens in your mind? What would happen in students' minds? Which phrase suggests critical thinking? Which phrase naturally leads to action? Which phrase makes you think of questioning and problem solving? Which phrase makes you want to do something?

5. Change "presentations" to "interactive learning experiences."

This one is difficult, but very possible. Let's assume you want your students to become active learners who develop their own knowledge - students who actively investigate, question, analyze, and problem solve. Let's also assume that your students decided to conduct an investigation, carried it out successfully, synthesized and analyzed the material, and developed conclusions. Those activities would constitute an active learning/constructivist exercise. If you then ask the students to make presentations on what they

discovered/learned, you will be putting the class into the position of being receivers of information just as they would be if you were giving the information. So while the investigators have had a constructivist experience, the presentation becomes exactly what you are trying to avoid.

How boring can student presentations be? Very, very boring! However, students can learn, just as most educators are having to learn, that there are ways to get students involved which will allow those students to learn actively. As long as you call an activity a presentation, that's what you will get - a presentation - someone presenting and someone receiving. Instead, you can explain to students that they are now the experts in the topic and their job is to think of an activity that they can conduct with the rest of the class that will allow the class members to be actively involved in learning about the topic. This will be quite a struggle and very awkward at first, but you will be amazed at how creative the students will become when they figure out the intent and the goal.

The age of your students will make some difference here, but I have seen student teachers do this successfully with fourth graders as well as high school students. One way to develop this is to ask for the students' ideas on how this could happen. Another is to reflect on components of active learning experiences you develop for the class and figure out how students can learn to use those same components as they develop interactive learning experiences for the class.

Using new language won't cure all the problems of making the shift from a traditional classroom to a constructivist one, but it will allow and force you to refocus your thinking which in turn should change your actions, your students' actions, and your classroom. If you don't change your language, you will have a difficult time shifting your thinking, and you will have minimal results. No teacher can speak in a traditional language and expect to have a constructivist classroom.

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